

Forest Facts

Finding a Good Arborist

by Ray Moritz

Finding a good arborist is not easy. Unless you are looking for entertainment rather than competent tree work, I wouldn't hire someone standing at your front door with a chain saw. Arborists are a mixed bag. I know arborists with Ph.D.s in forest sciences and arborists without high school diplomas. Yet they have the same certification. There is no state licensing of arborists. However, I recommend hiring only an insured state of California D49-licenses tree-service contractor. Any reputable tree service will provide you certificates of insurance for liability and workers' compensation. You do not want to be the one required to compensate an injured worker. Several professional organizations certify tree-care professionals. However, certification does not require any formal education, and it is no guarantee of professionalism.

Steps to finding your dream tree service:

- If you want someone you can trust to take professional care of your trees long term, you have to put in some time doing research and auditions.
- Start with the phone book, but that may not tell you anything about the company's qualifications. The size of the ad doesn't mean a thing. The best companies operate almost entirely on word of mouth.
- You might call a consulting arborist or urban forester and ask for at least three recommendations. You can also call or web search professional organizations such as the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) (www.isa-arbor.com, (217) 355-9411 or the Tree Care Industry Association (www.tcia.org, (800) 733-2622) for credentialed arborists in your area.

The tree service should have a professionally qualified person such as a certified arborist, registered consulting arborist or urban forester on its staff. The best companies will also have at least one ISA-certified tree worker on each crew.

- If you are not sure what your trees need, hire a credentialed member of the American Society of Consulting Arborists, a Society of American Foresters certified urban forester

(www.safnet.org/certifiedforester) or an ISA board-certified master arborist to inspect your property and write specifications for your tree work. They should be independent of a tree-trimming service or pesticide-application service.

- Call at least three companies to survey your trees and get bids. Ask for proof of insurance, contractor's license number, whether they hold a local license and the name of their certified arborist or forester. If you get a negative response to any of these requests, find another company. Also, check the company with the Better Business Bureau and state licensing board for any complaints, disciplinary actions or fines.

When you meet with the arborist:

- Ask to see current certificates of liability and workers' compensation insurance. Before work starts, check with their insurance agent to be certain their insurance policy is active.
- Walk them through the property to identify any tree problems they see. Have them explain the problem fully and clearly, including what they would do to remedy the problem and what the options are.
- Discuss ISA pruning standards and American National Standards Institute criteria. A knowledgeable, skilled arborist will be well versed in current safety, pruning, fertilizing and cabling standards.
- Don't be rushed into signing a contract, even if you are offered a 10% discount for signing immediately.
- Do not pay in advance. Hold at least 50% of the agreed price until the work is completed and cleaned up.
- Even if you are on a limited budget, do not select an arborist on the basis of price alone. You may well be able to get a discount from a skilled, professional company if you offer to delay the work until the off-season. Good companies are jammed with work during the spring and summer. Winter is a good time to inspect and work on trees, especially deciduous trees. The structure of the tree is usually more visible, and defoliated branches are easier to trim, clean up and haul.

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